

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000437

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT-ELECT GASPAROVIC SAYING THE RIGHT THINGS

REF: BRATISLAVA 407

Classified By: Amb. Ronald Weiser for reason 1.4 b and d

¶11. (U) Introduction/Summary. On April 17, Ivan Gasparovic beat former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar in the presidential elections runoff. In the final round, Gasparovic picked up more than 637,000 votes over his showing in the first round, receiving support of most of those who voted for the first round losers, while Meciar only increased his total vote count by about 72,000. Gasparovic, the candidate of a confederation of nationalist parties and endorsed by Robert Fico's Smer, won in all eight voting regions and in 42 out of 50 districts. Since winning, Gasparovic has clarified his views on various issues and has stated that the worldwide threat of terrorism has justified the presence of Slovak troops in Iraq and that he will try to support social and economic reforms while reducing their negative impact on citizens. President Schuster will leave office on June 15, when Gasparovic is inaugurated to serve a five-year term. End Introduction/Summary.

Gasparovic Wins as the Lesser Evil

¶12. (C) The presidential runoff held on April 17 was widely viewed as a battle between the lesser of two evils. Gasparovic was able to pull out the upset over Meciar, who has a stable and disciplined electorate, because Gasparovic did not have the negative name recognition associated with Meciar. Although Gasparovic was closely associated with Meciar during the 1990s, Gasparovic gained votes from people who supported Schuster, Foreign Minister Kukan, former Ambassador to the U.S. Butora, and Christian Democrat candidate Frantisek Miklosko in the first round. Gasparovic would not have won without votes from Prime Minister Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU), Bela Bugar's Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), and Pavol Hrusovsky's Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). These voters chose to ignore their party leaders instructions to stay away from the polls. Many instead chose to vote for Gasparovic, whom they viewed as the lesser of two evils.

¶13. (C) Several SDKU and ANO contacts told emboffs that Meciar, in spite of his murky past, would now behave "responsibly" and is more predictable than the lesser-known Gasparovic, who was supported by Fico's populist Smer. SDKU MP Roman Vavrik told emboffs that he expected that Gasparovic would assist Fico in reach his goal of becoming prime minister, even if that meant early elections. (See reftel on Fico's goals.)

Generally Saying the Right Things

¶14. (U) On April 19, Gasparovic--who once opposed deployment of troops to Iraq--told the press that the threat of worldwide terrorism justified the presence of Slovak troops in Iraq. He added that each state has an obligation to become involved in the fight against terrorism.

¶15. (U) Gasparovic has stated publicly that he does not "owe" anything to Smer, despite the party's public support of his candidacy. Fico has echoed those comments, adding that Smer will not look to the new president for preferential treatment.

¶16. (U) Gasparovic has distanced himself for the time being from his alliance with the nationalists that he forged last year. He told the press that the Alliance of Slovak National Powers, which he founded, may become a political party in the future that would be committed to modern European democratic principles. In addition, he has stated that EU accession will be a "watershed" event in Slovak-Hungarian relations as it will contribute to resolving several issues. He believes that there are sufficient legal rights to ensure the survival and promote the development of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, adding that they do not need special treatment.

¶17. (U) He has stressed that he will work to improve the relationships between the prime minister, the president, and the speaker of parliament in the coming months, acknowledging that as president, he should not interfere in the coalition's political disputes. Gasparovic added that it is the president's role to submit proposals and seek agreement with the government and the parliament.

Comments of Concern

18. (SBU) Gasparovic, whose only foreign language is Russian, has already indicated his interest in developing Slovak-Russian economic ties. (Note: He will probably receive strong support from Smer as Fico has also been interested in increasing business contacts between Moscow and Bratislava.)

Comment

19. (C) Presidential elections conveyed a positive message in spite of the surprising choice of candidates--democratic instincts of Slovak voters are more deeply rooted than many believed. Lacking any clear recommendations from their party leaders, voters recognized the extent of damage Meciar's comeback could do both domestically and abroad, and mobilized to prevent it. Although many questions remain about Gasparovic, he has publicly apologized for past mistakes and distanced himself from Meciar's style of government. Many politicians within SDKU and KDH fear that Gasparovic will work closely with Fico. To date, Gasparovic has not made any statements on Roma issues but KDH fears that his nationalist tendencies may only further fan existing tensions between Slovak and Roma communities.

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